

## **Geographic Review Panel 4 – San Joaquin River**

**Proposal number:** 2001-C211

**Short Proposal Title:** Merced River Ranch Restoration

**1. Applicability to CALFED ERP Goals and Implementation Plan and CVPIA priorities, and relevance to ERP and CVPIA priorities for your region.** The Panel believes that an action to evaluate and implement a pilot study on the feasibility of using dredger tailings for restoration of adjacent floodplain and channel habitats could be an important effort for this region. Currently in the San Joaquin Basin there is a limited aggregate resources from permitted sources which often leads to high restoration costs and even the more rapid depletion of existing floodplain gravel reserves. This evaluation and pilot effort could lead to a template for other restoration and reclamation plans that could have broader benefits to improve at risk species such as chinook salmon and many riparian-dependent species and to rehabilitate natural processes and protect and restore functional habitats.

**2. Linkages/coordination with previously funded projects or other restoration activities in your region.** This is a proposal for phases 2 and 3 of a land acquisition project funded by CALFED in 1998. Additionally, the AFRP is currently funding the CDFG to evaluate “Feasibility of Long-Term Aggregate Source for San Joaquin Tributary Channel Restoration Projects” at this site. However, the linkage between the AFRP evaluation and this proposed evaluation and pilot effort that is intended to tier off of the AFRP investigation is less than clear and reflects some lack of coordination. The Merced River is a sediment-starved river and has been the focus of ongoing spawning gravel augmentation projects. Also, downstream restoration projects in the Merced River Salmon Enhancement Project will also need a long-term source of material for maintenance. This feasibility concept has been discussed in the Merced River Stakeholder group and several landowners are interested in learning more about how to use dredger-tailing resources for the dual purpose of economic and ecologic benefit. There are also numerous channel and floodplain restoration projects planned on the other two San Joaquin River tributaries that will require large amounts of material for fill and maintenance as well as substantial dredger resources.

**3. Feasibility, especially the project’s ability to move forward in a timely and successful manner.** Phase II is feasible, but it is premature to evaluate the feasibility of Phase III.

**4. Qualifications of the applicants and others involved in implementing the proposed project.** The project team has the qualifications to implement such a project. However, additional peer review aside from the project team and the Merced River Stakeholder Technical Advisory Committee is recommended.

**5. Local involvement (including environmental compliance).** As mentioned previously, the Merced River Stakeholder Group is aware of this opportunity and has been appraised of the potential project, but have not seen the proposal and very few

specifics have been conveyed from the project team to the Stakeholder Group, probably due to time limitations.

**6. Cost.** The Panel feels that some costs for Phase II are high and unjustified. For instance, the cost of environmental documentation and permitting for the pilot restoration of 60 acres of tailings is around \$270,000. For comparison, environmental documentation and permitting on two substantially larger projects, the Robinson Ranch Restoration and the Ruddy Project on the Tuolumne River, were about \$100,000 each. Also, some clarification is needed on monitoring expenses. Proponents request \$17,000 for one year of redd surveys. It is unclear where and to what extent these surveys will be done and why CDFG redd surveys cannot be used.

The Panel concurs with the Staff Review and TARP, cost estimates for Phase III are not based on real information because Phase II must be completed first.

**7. Cost sharing.** None, Staff identified cost share is from CVPIA.

**8. Additional comments.** The Panel is concerned about monitoring for this project. Budget detail shows that just one year of post project monitoring would be done.

Staff Review felt that the project was not well conceived, beginning with poor conceptual model development, and the TARP also felt that details related to concepts, objectives and hypotheses were wanting. This Panel concurs with the above, that lots of concepts are outlined but the synthesis could be stronger.

Phase II, if funded, should be re-visited in terms of linkage to the AFRP project as well as the most important technical design aspects to focus on. The Panel also concurs with the TARP that there is not enough information regarding Phase III to evaluate it. Funding of Phase III is premature, as well as full funding for environmental documentation and permitting in Phase II.

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## **Regional Ranking**

**Panel Ranking:** Medium low

**Provide a brief explanation of your ranking:** This type of evaluation is needed for this region. However, the Panel feels that some of the tasks are not well justified and that it is premature to fund some components of Phase II (tasks 2 and 3) and all of Phase III. The importance of such an evaluation suggests that additional coordination with the AFRP funded evaluation to clarify linkages and reduce redundancies is warranted and, that some level of outside review is encouraged early on if funded (see Staff Review recommendation).